

**USA**

# EDUCATION

**IN BRIEF**



# INTRODUCTION



International Baccalaureate students in Washington state respond to a science question.

**A**ll societies must wrestle with fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of their educational system, but the United States was the first nation to face these questions as a democracy.

Early on, Americans understood that their future as a free people rested upon their own wisdom and judgment, and not that of some distant ruler. For this reason, the quality, character, and costs of education have remained among the country's central preoccupations since its founding.

Educational institutions of all types and sizes, from nursery schools to advanced research institutions, populate the American landscape. Public schools have been described as the nation's most familiar government institutions. Whether communities are poor or affluent, urban or rural, public schools are a common denominator throughout the United States.

From their origins two centuries ago through today, America's public and private schools have served to define

the American identity. Every national experience shaping the American character has been played out in its classrooms: race and treatment of minorities, immigration and growth of cities, westward expansion and economic growth, individual freedom and the nature of community.

Fundamental questions about the purpose and methods of education have resonated in public debates in the United States from the "common school" movement of the early 19th century to debates over academic standards and testing today.

Should schools emphasize basic skills — reading, writing, and mathematics — or provide a broad education in the liberal arts and sciences? How can schools provide equal access to all yet maintain high academic standards? Who should pay for schools — parents or the public? Should schools focus on practical, job-oriented skills, or give all children the academic courses necessary to succeed in college? How should teachers impart moral and spiritual values to the children of different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds? What criteria should be used for selecting secondary school students for admission to prestigious colleges and universities?

The answers to these questions are not easy, and, in fact, schools in the United States have answered them in very different ways at different times in the nation's history. Today, as in the past, education remains a topic of vigorous debate, rapid change, and enduring values.



Students experimenting with hydraulics in a vocational class.

## Structure of U.S. Education

**F**or someone from another country, the U.S. educational system understandably appears large and varied, even chaotic. Within this complexity, however, American education reflects the history, culture, and values of the changing country itself. From a broad perspective, the American educational system can be characterized by its large size, organizational structure, marked decentralization, and increasing diversity.

## ***Size***

Schools in the United States — public and private, elementary and secondary, state universities and private colleges — can be found everywhere, and the United States continues to operate one of the largest universal education systems in the world. More than 75 million children and adults were enrolled in U.S. schools and colleges in the 2005-2006 academic year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Another 6.8 million were employed as teachers, teaching kindergarten through college.

In addition, more than a million preschool children from low-income families, usually ages three and four, attend Head Start programs designed to provide learning, social development, and nutrition programs to ensure that these preschoolers will be ready for school at age five or six.

Public school enrollments grew exponentially during the post-World War II “baby boom” generation (usually defined as those born from 1946 to 1964). After a drop-off in the 1980s, enrollments have rebounded strongly, largely as a result of growing Hispanic populations, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau reports.

The U.S. educational system today comprises almost 96,000 public elementary and secondary schools, plus more than 4,200 institutions of higher learning, ranging from small,



Preschoolers listen to a story in a Head Start classroom.

two-year community colleges to massive state universities with undergraduate and graduate programs in excess of 30,000 students.

The nation's total expenditures for education stand at approximately \$878 billion a year.

### ***K-12 Organization***

School attendance is compulsory for students through age 16 in most states. Children generally begin elementary school with kindergarten (K) at age five and continue through secondary school (grade 12) to age 18. Typically, the elementary

school years include kindergarten through grades five or six, and at some schools through grade eight. Secondary schools — known as high schools in the United States — generally include grades nine through 12.

Fifty years ago, elementary school students typically moved immediately to high school, or they attended junior high school for grades seven and eight or grades seven, eight, and nine. During the past 30 years, however, junior high schools have been largely replaced with middle schools configured for grades six through eight, or roughly for the same grades as junior high. Estimates are that 20 million young people, ages 10 to 15, attend middle schools today.

As Minnesota principal Mark Ziebarth described the difference between the two approaches, "A junior high school program is designed to mirror a traditional high school program for students at a younger age. It has a similar schedule to the high school and classes are arranged by departments. Middle schools are designed to provide a forum to meet the special needs of adolescents."

Team teaching and flexible block scheduling, rather than set 45- or 50-minute classes, are characteristic of middle schools. These schools also place emphasis on small groups, on an interdisciplinary approach to subject matter, and on special projects that can engage 10- to 15-year-olds, who, says the National Middle School Association, "are undergoing the



English language learners in a middle school in Grand Island, Nebraska.

most rapid intellectual and developmental changes of their lives.”

The large contemporary high school, offering a broad menu of academic and elective courses for students

ages 14 to 18, became a fixture in American education by the mid-20th century. High school students also can choose from a host of clubs, activities, athletics, work-study arrangements, and other extracurricular activities. Based on grades and tests, students can take advanced academic courses or more general or vocational classwork.

Through most of the 20th century, high schools were consolidated into larger units to offer wider class choices to more and more students. The rural country school almost disappeared, replaced by countywide high schools. In cities, it was not uncommon for large school campuses to hold as many as 5,000 students with both college-oriented and vocational courses that could appeal to just about everyone.

More recently, concerns over the caliber of education in such large schools has led to a call for the establishment of smaller schools with lower student-teacher ratios.



The contemporary American high school has long loomed large in the public culture. The popular musical *Grease*, the television series *Happy Days*, and movies like *Blackboard Jungle* depicted the light and dark sides of schools in the 1950s. Recent popular entertainments with high school settings range from films like *Mean Girls*, *Juno*, *Election*, and *High School Musical* to such hit TV shows as *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Saved by the Bell*.

### ***Private Schools***

Private schools flourish in the United States; many of these schools are run by churches and other religious organizations. Of the estimated 55.8 million children attending elementary and secondary schools during the 2007-2008 academic year, about 6 million, or 11 percent, were enrolled in private schools.

More than half of the nation's private school students attend Catholic schools, the nation's oldest private school system. Other private schools reflect America's religious diversity, encompassing nearly all major Protestant denominations and the Quaker, Islamic, Jewish, and Greek Orthodox faiths.

The country's oldest private schools, however, are elite boarding schools, founded in the 18th century, which have had a record of educating many of the country's intellectual and political leaders.



Working in the computer lab in a Detroit, Michigan, elementary school.

Another 1.1 million students are home-schooled by their parents under guidelines established by each of the 50 states, according to recent census figures.

### ***Local Control***

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of American education is its decentralization. Schools in the United States have been, and remain, overwhelmingly a state

and local responsibility. Unlike most other nations, the United States does not operate a national education system — with only a few exceptions, notably the nation's military academies and Native American schools. Neither does the federal government approve nor administer a national curriculum.

Public education constitutes the single largest expenditure for almost every U.S. city and county, which receive the bulk of their funding from local property taxes. Local boards of education, most of which are elected, administer the nation's nearly 15,500 school districts, ranging from small rural schools

in states like Kansas and Nebraska to the New York City system, which educates more than a million children annually.

State boards of education, along with a state superintendent or commissioner, oversee local education districts, set student and teacher standards, approve the classroom curriculum, and often review textbook selections. The state's chief power, however, is increasingly financial: Most states now provide substantial aid to schools to supplement local tax revenues.

One consequence of local control and financing of public schools has been disparities between affluent and poor school districts. In recent years, under pressure from state courts and public advocacy groups, many states have taken steps to ensure more equitable funding of school districts regardless of income levels.

The federal government provides research and support to ensure equal access and excellence in education, along with funding student loan programs and assistance to lower-income students. Nevertheless, responsibility for education remains primarily a state and local enterprise. According to the U.S. Department of Education, about 90 percent of the annual expenditures for education at all levels comes from state, local, and private sources.

## ***Diversity***

Schools in the United States have experienced waves of immigration throughout their history, and today American schools, like the larger society they serve, are more ethnically diverse than ever. In the early 20th century, children of immigrant families — most from southern and eastern Europe — flooded public school systems in the Northeast and Midwest. Today new immigrants continue to change the ethnic composition of student populations, although the largest numbers now come from Latin America and Asia.

African Americans constitute about 17 percent of the K-12 student population; Hispanics, however, are becoming the largest single minority group in public schools. It is not uncommon to find schools, especially along the East and West Coasts, where more than a dozen different languages, from Arabic to Vietnamese, are spoken at home by students of foreign-born parents. As a result, the teaching of English as a second language remains one of education's most important responsibilities.

Despite their decentralization and diversity, public schools remain remarkably cohesive in the ways they are run. A student transferring from a school in California to one in Pennsylvania or Georgia will find differences no doubt, but the mix of academic subjects will be largely familiar, despite the fact that the federal government does not mandate a national curriculum.



Ohio State University, one of the first land-grant universities, established in 1873.

## Rise of the Public School

**P**ublic schools were unknown in the colonial era, although several New England colonies established “subscription schools” for those who could afford to pay the fees. Harvard, the first institution of higher learning in North America, was founded in 1636 in Massachusetts and, like all early colleges, focused almost exclusively on religious scholarship and classical languages — Latin and Greek.



Students looking up information for a geology experiment.

### ***The “Common” School***

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which encompassed the present-day states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan, mandated that every new township set aside one parcel of land out of every 36 for a public — or what was then termed a “common” — school. These were often simple one-room buildings topped with a steeple, celebrated in U.S.

history as the iconic "little red schoolhouse." In 1820 Congress authorized the collection of state education funds through the sale of public lands.

In the first half of the 19th century, reformer Horace Mann of Massachusetts launched an influential campaign for using state taxes to improve and support free common schools for all children. According to writer Lawrence Cremin, "The fight for free schools was a bitter one, and for 25 years the outcome was uncertain."

By 1860, however, most states had adopted the idea, mollifying protests against higher taxes by giving local communities control over their schools. The principle of publicly funded free education under local control had taken root in American society.

### ***Land for Colleges***

The Morrill Land Grant Act, enacted during the U.S. Civil War in 1862, employed the same mechanism of selling public lands to establish colleges for agriculture and industry. Today these land-grant schools, constituting some of the largest and most influential state universities in the country, offer a full range of liberal arts and professional programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Today there are 106 land-grant colleges.



A new citizens' naturalization ceremony in San Jose, California.

On the western frontier, settlers sought to build schools almost as soon as they established new towns. Congress, in fact, required territories to offer free public education to all before they could be considered for statehood. "Schools became important civic amenities that could draw settlers," says historian Kathryn Sklar in the book *School*.

But frontier schools faced far different challenges than urban schools, chief among them an acute lack of teachers. Catherine Beecher, sister to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* author Harriet Beecher Stowe, led a successful campaign to promote women teachers as a "civilizing force" in the West. These women faced the hardships of the frontier equipped with little more than their belief in the calling of education and a series of popular textbooks tailored for western schools, called *McGuffey Readers*. These textbooks interspersed lessons in reading and arithmetic with "moral tales" designed to build character.



## ***Urban Immigrants***

Public schools grew with the steady influx of immigrant schoolchildren, largely from Europe, but with significant populations of Chinese and Japanese on the West Coast and Mexicans and Latin Americans in the Southwest. Each of the successive waves of immigrants challenged not only the capacity but the aims and organization of the American educational system as it coped with unprecedented numbers of new students.

The challenge of assimilating and educating children from vastly different backgrounds and languages was especially acute in the major destination cities for immigrants — whether Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians in the mid-19th century, or eastern and southern Europeans in the peak immigration years of the 1890s through the 1920s.

Urban schools could be grim and overcrowded places, but as recounted in the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) book *School*, "So powerful was the lure of education that on a day after a steamship arrived, as many as 125 children would apply to one New York school."

Even so, estimates are that, with unrestricted child labor, only about 50 percent of children attended school at all, and the average period of time was five years.

The growth of public schools in this period was enormous

— from 7.6 million students in 1870 to 12.7 million by the end of the 19th century. The United States, according to the book *School*, “was providing more schooling to more children than any other nation on earth.”

As scholar and educational historian Diane Ravitch writes in *School*: “The American school system’s readiness to provide social mobility to low-income students was truly remarkable; its efforts to assimilate newcomers into American society were largely successful. ... These were the enduring accomplishments of the American public school.”

## **Education for All**

**B**y the mid-20th century, the ideal of universal education from kindergarten through high school had become a reality for substantial numbers of Americans. But certainly not for all, especially the nation’s racial minorities.

### ***Segregation***

The largest exception to the growing inclusion of U.S. public education was African Americans. Before the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), southern slaves not only had little access to education but could be punished for learning to read. With the end of slavery, black Americans in the South lived



Little Rock Central High School, Arkansas, 1957, a landmark in racially integrating schools in the south.

largely segregated lives. Education was no exception, despite the establishment of schools by the Freedmen's Bureau and others to meet the demand for what black educator Booker T.

Washington called "an

entire race trying to go to school." Segregated schools, upheld in an 1896 Supreme Court decision under the doctrine of "separate but equal," became the practice in 17 southern and border states into the 20th century. Even so, estimates are that black literacy in the decades following the Civil War jumped from 5 percent to 70 percent.

Outside of the South, the principal issue was one of population and housing patterns that resulted in de facto segregation of black and white students. As urban areas became concentrated with African Americans, city school systems developed into predominantly minority enclaves surrounded by largely white suburban schools.

## ***Brown v. Board of Education***

African Americans challenged segregation throughout the nation's history with little success until school integration became central to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1950, after years of careful preparation, the nation's oldest civil rights organization, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) recruited 13 black parents in Topeka, Kansas, who attempted to enroll their children in their local schools. The NAACP sued when they were turned away, and by the time the *Brown v. Board of Education* case reached the Supreme Court, it had been consolidated with similar cases from three other states and the District of Columbia.

In a unanimous 1954 decision, the Court declared, "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Kansas and other border states complied with the decision, but the South defied the Court in a campaign called "massive resistance" that resulted in an ongoing confrontation between the state and federal governments. The integration of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas in 1957 required the dispatch of U.S. Army soldiers, and when black student James Meredith enrolled in the University of Mississippi, it triggered widespread rioting. Southern resistance to school integration didn't end in many

parts of the South until the years following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 under President Lyndon Johnson.



Nuevo Schools English Academy in Rogers, Arkansas.

Equally important to the cause of integration was the first significant infusion of federal funds into public education through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, which has since provided billions of dollars in aid to school districts with poor and disadvantaged children. Only schools that could demonstrate that they didn't practice racial discrimination were eligible for Title I funding.

Racial imbalances persist in many public schools, however, as a result of residential patterns and the concentration of minorities in urban areas. An ongoing study by Harvard University has found that racial segregation has increased in a number of states with high minority populations, affecting many poorer Hispanic students as well as African Americans. By contrast, Asian Americans are the minority group most likely to attend racially mixed schools.

The lesson is that although American education remains committed to principles of equality, it often falls short of that goal in practice.

### ***Bilingual Education and Assimilation***

The legacy of *Brown* and its principle of equal access for all served as a model for other racial minorities, as well as for women and the disabled.

Hispanics often found themselves in segregated, poor schools, and, in fact, a little-known 1947 court decision ended separate schools for Spanish-speaking students in California.

The language question remained, however: whether to place students in English immersion programs or in bilingual classes where students continue to use their native language, typically Spanish, while also learning English.

The question of bilingual education is an old one and



Students engaged in a biology class experiment.

reflects a continuing debate over whether the United States should be seen primarily as a melting pot, emphasizing a common identity, or as a mosaic, with clearly defined cultures and backgrounds.

Bilingual proponents contend that students can keep up academically in their native language and transition to regular classes when they have learned English. Advocates for English argue that a bilingual approach only slows down mastery of English and prevents students from joining the mainstream culture.

Many school districts adopted bilingual approaches in the 1960s and 1970s, but their popularity has waned along with lack of funding. In recent years, the typical pattern is to designate students as "English Language Learners" and place them in regular English classes, supported by specialists in teaching English as a second language. About 3.7 million, or 8 percent of all students, receive special English language services, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

## ***Women and Title IX***



Acoma Pueblo students of New Mexico learning English.

The campaign for equal rights for women in education focused primarily on colleges and universities. The result was Title IX, a 1972 amendment to the Higher Education Act that banned discrimination on the basis of gender in higher learning. As a result, women's enrollment in traditionally male professional programs such as medicine, law, and engineering increased markedly.

The most public controversy over Title IX, however, has concerned athletes and whether the law unfairly harmed men's collegiate sports programs. The issue has been a subject of furious debate in political and sports circles. Proponents cite the profound impact of Title IX in opening up academic as well as athletic opportunities for girls and women. Opponents argue that the law has become little more than a quota system that harms the interests of both men and women.



## ***Mainstreaming***

Advocates for disabled and "special needs" students also drew upon the model of the civil rights movement to call for fuller inclusion of these students in regular classrooms and school activities, a process termed "mainstreaming." They argue that studies show that placing physically and mentally disabled students in regular classes for at least part of the day results in higher academic achievement, greater self-esteem, and improved social skills.

A 1975 law, now known as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, calls for all children with disabilities to receive "a free appropriate public education." The law requires schools to prepare an individual education plan, or IEP, for each disabled child and to place the child in the least restrictive classroom setting possible.

The law has enjoyed widespread support, although the costs of implementation have grown rapidly. Much of the overall increase in spending for public education in recent years can be attributed to the costs associated with providing an accessible, equitable education for children and adolescents with physical and mental disabilities.

According to recent figures, U.S. public schools are educating about 6.1 million special-needs children. The most common learning disability is speech and language impairment,

but special needs can include disabilities as a result of mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or physical problems.

### ***Native American Schools***

One of the few exceptions to the direct involvement of the federal government in education is that of Native Americans. The federal administration of Indian schools reflects the special relationship between the government and the semi-sovereign tribes of American Indian and Native Alaskan peoples that is embodied in both laws and treaties.



Cooperating on math problems in Tesuque, New Mexico.

The first exposure of American Indians to formal schooling often came through missionaries and church schools, where the emphasis was less upon academic instruction than religious conversion and becoming westernized in manner and dress. As the frontier moved west in the 19th century, many of these church-run schools were gradually replaced by those operated by the federal government's Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The policy of these schools was to assimilate Native Americans into the mainstream by forcibly stripping them of their tribal culture. Many Indians were educated in boarding schools, often far from home, where they had their hair cut and their native clothes replaced and they were forbidden to speak their own languages. The most prominent of these boarding schools was the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania.

A 1928 report spotlighting failures and abuses in Indian education led to reforms and increased financial aid known as the Indian New Deal. Later, the civil rights movement sparked a parallel Indian rights movement. Over decades, the federal government reversed policy and established an educational system that seeks to provide modern skills and knowledge while preserving the traditions and culture of Native American peoples.

Today the Bureau of Indian Education administers 184 elementary and secondary schools, along with 24 colleges. These schools are located on 63 reservations in 23 states across

the United States, serving approximately 60,000 students who represent 238 different tribes.

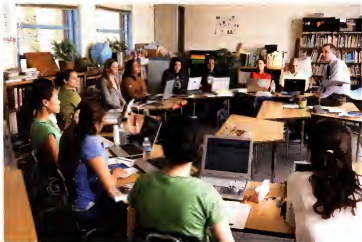
## **Seeking Educational Excellence**

**T**he movement for what is sometimes termed “excellence in education” has taken many forms. One set of changes emphasizes a back-to-basics, or core, curriculum focused on math, science, history, and the language arts (reading, writing, and literature). Most elementary and secondary schools also provide so-called gifted and talented programs for high-achieving students.

### ***AP and IB***

For American high school students looking to excel academically, the two most common approaches today are known by their initials: AP for Advanced Placement and IB for International Baccalaureate. AP and IB are different in some respects, but both require demanding coursework that can propel students to greater academic achievement in college.

Advanced Placement, founded in 1955, is run by the College Board, which comprises 5,200 schools, colleges, and other educational organizations. Through AP, the College Board has developed strenuous, college-level courses in more than 30



Teacher education class in Los Angeles.

subjects that students can take in high school. AP students earn academic credits for college in the United States and 40 other countries — provided they score high enough on AP tests given in their junior and senior years (grades 11 and 12).

More than 60 percent of American high schools offer AP courses, according to the Department of Education. The most frequently taken tests are calculus, English literature, and history. In 2006 more than 24 percent of all U.S. high school students took AP exams, up from 16 percent in 2000.

The IB diploma program is administered by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) in Switzerland and grew out

of efforts to establish a common curriculum and system of academic credits that would be recognized by colleges and universities in other countries.

IBO works with more than 2,000 schools in 125 countries, including nearly 800 in the United States. Students follow a rigorous curriculum in six academic areas: English, foreign language, science, mathematics, social science, and the arts. They must also perform 200 hours of community service and write a 4,000-word essay based on independent research.

### ***Assessing Teachers***



In Los Angeles, learning to use a computer in an adult education class.

The numbers and qualifications of teachers are subjects of perennial debate, although some experts have pointed to the turnover of teachers as often a greater problem than an overall teacher shortage.

One indicator of the push for higher standards in recent years is student-teacher ratios, with lower ratios indicating that teachers can spend more time with individual students. From 1980 to 2001, the student-teacher ratio in elementary

and secondary schools declined from 18.6 to 15.8 students per teacher, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. This ratio reflects, in part, the increase in special education teachers for the disabled or for teaching English as a second language, and typical public classroom sizes are often in the 20s.

Recent figures also indicate that more than 90 percent of all public school teachers are rated as "highly qualified," meaning that they are experienced and certified to teach in their subject area. These same figures reveal a familiar social and economic divide, however, with more highly qualified teachers in wealthier schools and fewer in minority and poorer schools.

"Even if you have high numbers [of certified instructors] in the aggregate," said one official of the Education Department to the newspaper *USA Today*, "there are pockets where students are being taught by teachers that are not highly qualified."

Although local school districts have considerable flexibility in how they organize their instructional programs, teacher training tends to function as a countervailing force. States may have different requirements for certification, for instance, but all states recognize the same college degrees and coursework, regardless of the location of the school. As a result, most teachers, similarly trained and accredited, teach the basic core subjects in roughly the same manner and sequence throughout the country.



Students listening to a lecture at Merritt College in Oakland, California.

Textbooks typically represent a substantial investment by book publishers who want to ensure that their products are approved and purchased by as many state and local boards of education as possible. As a result, two of the country's largest school systems — Texas and California — wield enormous influence over textbook content and publication.

### ***Computers and Education***

Computers and the Internet have now become ubiquitous in American schools from the elementary grades onward.



Recent figures indicate that 100 percent of public schools have Internet access and that elementary and secondary schools possess more than 14 million personal computers, roughly one for every four students.

If the digital divide has been spanned at school, it still remains a factor at home, according to the Department of Education, which found that minority and poor students often lack computer and Internet access at home.

School-oriented Web sites like Blackboard.com have become a routine means for posting assignments, homework, and class schedules. Along with e-mail, these Web sites have become a favorite way for parents and teachers to stay in direct communication.

As Internet capacity has increased, so has distance or online learning. Almost 3.5 million, or 20 percent of all college students, took one or more online courses during the 2006-2007 academic year — an increase of almost 10 percent over the previous year, according to Sloan Consortium, an organization working to improve online education.

Roughly half of all online students are enrolled at the nation's community colleges, where the most popular courses are in such professional fields as business management, computer science, engineering, and health sciences-related programs.



Working on a high school physics experiment in Hidalgo, Texas.

## Challenge of School Reform

**A**mericans have always debated the quality and direction of their educational system, but in recent years the focus has been upon the best ways to measure and increase academic achievement. Comparisons with students in other countries have also sharpened the debate over educational methods and results, especially those showing U.S. schools lagging in science and mathematics.

## ***Progressive Reforms***

Early reformers tried to establish consistent academic standards, train teachers, or consolidate schools in the name of efficiency. In other words, to transform education into a profession.

These efforts culminated in the Progressive Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when educators like John Dewey called for fundamental reform in what schools taught and how they operated. Dewey and his supporters urged giving teachers greater independence in the classroom, emphasizing learning by doing instead of rote memorization and challenging students to think independently.

But Dewey's "child-centered" approach was almost immediately challenged by those more interested in using new social science methods to increase efficiency and organize students into separate tracks of those destined for college or for manual labor. Progressive education was also widely misunderstood, as its emphasis on the needs of children became interpreted as a lack of academic standards.

## ***Nation at Risk***

Criticism of new or progressive ways of teaching resurfaced in the 1950s, when the debate over the most effective ways to



Using microscopes to observe bacteria in pond water in a high school science lab, Donna, Texas.

teach language skills to children triggered stories on "Why Johnny Can't Read." (A similar debate, two decades later, inevitably produced "Why Johnny Can't Write.")

The 1957 launch of the Soviet satellite *Sputnik* triggered similar concerns and led to an increased emphasis on science and mathematics in an era of Cold War conflict and the U.S.-Soviet space race.

In 1983, a highly influential report called *A Nation at Risk* asserted that declining academic standards threatened America's position in an increasingly competitive world and called for more resources and greater rigor in education.

The response to the *Risk* report ranged from lengthening the school day and year to greater emphasis on core academic subjects. Yet the report's conclusions have been vigorously disputed. "Not only is it not true there has been a great decline," contends historian Carl Kaestle in the book *School*, "but it is also true that we are educating a much wider proportion of our population now than we were in the 1950s."

## ***Charter Schools and Competition***

Many recent school reforms have sought to introduce greater competition into the public school system. Charter schools, for example, are independently operated public schools that must meet the same academic and legal requirements as traditional public schools but are free from most of the bureaucratic and regulatory constraints of their traditional counterparts. Approximately 2,000 charter schools are now operating in the United States.

Another response to concerns over academic standards and international competition has been to forge alliances between business and schools. In some cases, school districts have tried to emulate efficiencies and organization of the corporate model by establishing standards and goals that can be measured and by holding administrators and teachers accountable for results.

In the push for accountability, many states have passed laws permitting the closure of low-performing or failing public schools. In such cases, which are still rare, the schools can choose to reconstitute themselves with new staff and teachers or convert themselves to charter-school status. Families with failing neighborhood schools are often given the opportunity to transfer their children to higher-performing schools.

School vouchers have proven to be a highly controversial innovation. A voucher program permits parents to leave failing



Learning multiplication tables at a charter school in New Orleans, Louisiana.

or substandard public schools and receive public funds to cover all or part of the tuition at private schools. The amount is usually based on the per-student spending in the community. The idea is that if schools have to compete for students, they will improve. However, the controversy over using tax money to support private or religious schools has been intense, and few communities have fully implemented school vouchers.

## ***Privatization***

Estimates are that private, for-profit companies now operate 10 percent of the nation's public charter schools. One of the largest is Edison Schools, founded in 1992, which runs charter schools in 19 states and the District of Columbia, as well as providing "academic academies" and other services in partnership with existing public schools.

Traditional organizations of public school professionals like the National Education Association oppose privatization, contending that there is an inherent conflict between the profit demands of private companies and the needs of schoolchildren. Companies like Edison contend that competition can help improve both public and privatized schools, thereby benefiting the "customers" — students — just as in any other marketplace.

Both sides point to outside studies that buttress their side of the argument. Public school proponents cite reports in the 1990s that show there is no substantial edge for Edison students or that Edison schools publicize only favorable results. A RAND Corporation study in 2000, on the other hand, concluded that "student achievement gains at Edison Schools matched or exceeded similar improvements in student performance in comparable public schools."

## ***High School Redesign***

Another reform movement, led by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has taken a very different approach to educational reform through a fundamental rethinking of high schools themselves. "Our high schools were designed 50 years ago to meet the needs of another age," says Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft.

Over the past five years, the foundation has funded high-performing model schools that "engage all students with a rigorous curriculum. They offer coursework that is relevant to students' lives and aspirations. And they foster strong relationships between students and adults."

The Gates redesign effort also stresses that smaller is usually better. "All else being equal," says a foundation report, "students in small high schools score higher on tests, pass more courses, and go on to college more frequently than those in large ones. Moreover, these results appear to be greatest for low-income students and students of color."

## ***No Child Left Behind***

The most sweeping change to the federal role in education since the 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Act is the Bush administration's 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.





Second-grade charter school students in Bensalem, Pennsylvania.

NCLB requires states to set educational standards for achievement at different grade levels and to take steps to improve the performance of those who don't meet the standards.

NCLB mandates state goals for what children should know in reading and mathematics in grades three through eight as measured on standardized

tests. These and other accountability measures of school performance are then collected into statewide annual report cards.

Although state and local school systems have considerable flexibility in upgrading performance levels, the law provides for eventual removal of students and funding from failing schools. Parents with children in failing schools can transfer to other public schools or charter schools. They also are eligible for tutoring and other special services.

NCLB has generated responses ranging from strong support to skepticism to outright opposition, according to a 2004 report by the Education Commission of the States.



Smiling Toyota scholarship winner in San Marcos, Texas.

Supporters believe that the nationwide institution of standards, testing, and accountability are essential to building and maintaining high-quality schools that can succeed in an intensely competitive global economy.

Other groups, such as the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, have raised strong concerns about how the law distinguishes between effective and ineffective schools when student populations differ so much in background, income, and English language

ability. Parents point to schools sacrificing art classes or other enrichment activities to “teach to the test” and avoid any designation as a failing school.

Jason Kamras, 2005 National Teacher of the Year, says, “No Child Left Behind’s greatest strength is that it has institutionalized high expectations for every child in America.”

From a longer viewpoint, NCLB is only the latest installment in the long debate over balancing the demands of inclusion and excellence in American education.

## **Changing Face of Higher Education**

**A** greater proportion of young people receive higher education in the United States than in any other country. These students also can choose from more than 4,000 very different institutions. They can attend two-year community colleges or more specialized technical training institutes. Traditional four-year institutions range from small liberal arts colleges to massive state universities in places like California, Arizona, Ohio, and New York, each with multiple campuses and student populations exceeding 30,000. Approximately one-third of U.S. colleges and universities are private and generally charge tuition costs substantially higher than state-run public institutions.



North Carolina State University classroom with many veterans in the 1950s.

### ***G.I. Bill***

For much of their history, American institutions of higher learning remained bastions of privilege, with a predominantly white, male population. That pattern didn't change significantly until the passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944, when the federal

government paid for millions of World War II veterans to attend college. (G.I., which stands for "government issue," became a casual term for any Army soldier in World War II.)

The G.I. Bill of Rights included subsidies for attending virtually any recognized institution of higher learning, as well as payments for vocational training and subsidies to encourage home ownership. Congress didn't expect many to take advantage of the college provision, but within two years more than 1 million veterans were enrolled at the nation's colleges and universities, doubling the number of college students. Over a seven-year period, the G.I. Bill enabled more than 2.2 million veterans to attend college.

The social impact of the G.I. Bill has been little short of revolutionary. As scholar Milton Greenberg points out, "Today, American universities are now overwhelmingly public, focused heavily on occupational, technical, and scientific education, huge, urban-oriented, and highly democratic."

In subsequent decades, colleges and universities grew rapidly, as veterans were followed by their children, the so-called baby boom generation that began entering college in the 1960s.

Colleges and universities also began opening their doors wider to minorities and women. In recent years, more women than men have been attending colleges and universities and earning more bachelor's and master's degrees — a pattern that



Responsible citizens learn about "Democracy in Action" at Philadelphia's Constitution High School.

shows no signs of changing, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The proportion of minority students attending college has increased as well — from 14 percent in 1981 to 27 percent in 2005. Much of the change can be attributed to growing numbers of Hispanic and Asian students. African-American enrollments rose from 9 percent to 12 percent in the same period.

## ***Costs and Competition***

Higher education in the United States is an enormous enterprise, costing almost \$373 billion and consuming nearly 3 percent of the nation's gross domestic product. College costs for students can be high, especially for private institutions, which do not receive general subsidies from either state or federal governments. To ensure equal access to education for all, the United States administers an extensive financial aid program for students. Seven out of 10 students receive some form of financial aid, which typically combines grants, loans, and work opportunities to enable full-time students to meet their living costs and tuition.

Recently, several of the nation's wealthiest and most prestigious universities — schools like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, and Dartmouth, among others — announced plans to substantially increase their financial aid for low- and middle-income families.

Students compete for openings in the nation's better colleges and universities. At the same time, American institutions of higher learning of all types must broadly compete for the nation's top students and to admit sufficient numbers to maintain their enrollments. The most prestigious American universities — public and private — receive hundreds of applications for each opening. At the same time, it is true

that most secondary school graduates with good grades and strong scores on college entrance exams receive hundreds of solicitations from institutions of higher learning.

Reflecting the decentralized nature of American education, state governments may license institutions of higher learning, but accreditation, which grants academic standing to the college or university, is accorded by nongovernmental associations, not by states or the federal government.

### ***Community Colleges***

For an American high school graduate with a modest academic record and limited funds, enrolling in a community college may be a better option than attending a four-year college or university.

Two-year, associate-degree programs in such growing professional fields as health, business, and computer technology can be found at most of the nation's roughly 1,200 community colleges.

Community colleges are also gateways to four-year undergraduate institutions for students who need to bolster mediocre high school grades with stronger college credits.

Taking advantage of low fees and liberal admissions policies, more than 11 million American and an estimated 100,000 international students now attend community colleges.



## HBCUs

Most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded at times when either slavery or segregation ruled the South, and higher education for African Americans elsewhere was ignored or marginalized. Although the first



Nursing students at Hampton University, one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

college for African Americans — now Cheney University of Pennsylvania — was established in 1837, many of today's most prestigious black schools were established immediately after the Civil War, including Fisk University in Nashville,

Tennessee; Howard University in Washington, D.C.; and Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

Nineteen public HBCUs were founded with passage of the Second Morrill (Land Grant) Act in 1890 — many in the then firmly segregated South.

Today the White House Initiative on HBCUs counts 40 four-year public colleges and universities, 50 four-year private colleges, and 13 two-year community and business schools.



Journalism school graduates at New York's Columbia University.

Foreign students have long been a familiar and vital element of American higher education. In the 2006-2007 academic year, according to the publication *Open Doors*, almost 583,000 international students were enrolled in many of America's 4,000 colleges and universities, an increase of 3 percent over the previous year. India remains the largest single source of foreign students, followed by China, Korea, and Japan.

The top five areas of study for international students are business and management, engineering, physical and life sciences, social sciences, and mathematics and computer science.

International students attend U.S. colleges and institutions for the same reasons that Americans do: academic excellence, unparalleled choices in types of institutions and academic programs, and great flexibility in designing courses of study and even in transferring between different institutions.

With a wide range of tuition and living costs, plus opportunities for financial aid, foreign students find that a U.S. education can be affordable as well. Most large schools have international student advisers, and a worldwide network of student-advising centers, along with a variety of publications, can guide prospective students through the sometimes complicated process of finding, applying, and being accepted by an American college or university.

## **Educating a Democracy**

**I**n the words of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be."

## Teaching Democracy



Fourth-grade reading class students in New York City.

A democracy depends on the foundation of educated citizens who recognize the value of their hard-won individual freedoms and civic responsibilities.

In contrast to

the passive acceptance of authoritarian societies, the object of democratic education is to produce citizens who are independent and questioning yet deeply familiar with the precepts and practices of democracy.

As education scholar Chester Finn has said, "People may be born with an appetite for personal freedom, but they are not born with knowledge about the social and political arrangements that make freedom possible over time for themselves and their children. ... Such things must be acquired. They must be learned."

## ***National Identity***

America's schools may teach democratic values, but they also teach their students how to be Americans.

Ever since the nation's founding, Americans have recognized that, lacking a common ethnic identity or ancient culture, their national identity would have to rest upon other foundations: shared ideas about democracy and freedom and the common experience of working to build a society with equal opportunity for all.

For most Americans, the institution that most closely embodies those shared ideas and common experiences has been the nation's schools.

Over time, education in America has come to represent universal free public education for all, regardless of race, social background, or gender. Education, moreover, is seen as the primary means to succeed in a society that seeks to replace the claims of inherited privilege for those of individual freedom and equal opportunity.

The American classroom of the 21st century scarcely resembles that of a few decades ago, much less the one-room schoolhouse of a past century. Yet the role of American education in binding together a growing and diverse nation endures, transmitting the lasting values of freedom and human dignity from one generation to the next.



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